

Joseph, Jesus and the Book of Forgiveness

Genesis 50:15-21; Luke 23:33-34

Martin Luther said every morning we should rise from our beds with the words “I am baptized!”

Today I have another suggestion. Every day we should rise from sleep with a phrase from the Apostles Creed:

I believe...in the forgiveness of sins.

Do you?

One of the most important things in life, most central to our well-being is forgiveness, to accept forgiveness from God, to be able to forgive those who have hurt you, and to be able to forgive yourself.

It is so important we might call the whole book of Genesis, the whole Bible “The Book of Forgiveness.”

I

It begins in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed and God made clothes for them from animal skins. God wanted them free of shame and guilt, free from hiding. Forgiveness.

And Cain. He had just murdered his brother Abel. God sent him out into the wilderness—sin has consequences—sent him out as a fugitive and vagabond. But God place a mark on Cain's forehead that told people—Do not harm this man! Forgiveness. The mark did not stigmatize him as a murderer. It protected him.

That's when forgiveness begins with us all—with the forgiveness of God.

And the Jacob story. He had cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright and blessing and deceived his father. His mother Rebecca helped him escape his brother's murderous rage.

Years later he was returning home and had heard that Esau was on the way to meet him with 400 men and kill him. That night Jacob wrestled with an angel, with God, with self, in the Jabbok river, an all night wrestling. At dawn he left blessed and he left wounded, his hip wrenched out of socket.

That next morning the brothers met. Esau saw Jacob coming, limping on his hip. Jacob bowed himself before his brother. Esau raised him up, embraced him, wept and kissed him. Jacob wept too, and said, "To see your face is like seeing the face of God!"

And now the last story in Genesis, the story of Joseph. Russian novelist Tolstoy said it was the most perfect story ever written. It is a supreme forgiveness

story. You know it well—Joseph grew up his father’s favorite among 12 sons. His father Jacob doted on him and his brothers hated him. He was an insufferable, spoiled, entitled brat. His father Jacob gave him a splendid coat of many colors, and Joseph wore it as a neon sign that said, “Father loves me best!” He had a dream where eleven bundles of wheat bowed down to his bundle of wheat, then he told his dream to his brothers. They didn’t have to be Sigmund Freud to get the point, and they hated him even more.

Then one day Father Jacob sent Joseph out with food for his other sons. When Joseph got to them, they jumped him, stripped him, threw him into a deep pit and plotted how to kill him. A caravan headed toward Egypt passed by and they sold their brother into slavery. Then they dipped Joseph’s coat in an animal’s blood and returned to their father with a terrible lie: “A wild beast has killed your son.” Father Jacob crumbled. “I will wear my clothes of mourning until I die!” And he nearly did.

Joseph arrived in Egypt a slave imprisoned. From there he improbably, impossibly—except for God—rose to be Prince, Viceroy of Egypt, the Pharaoh’s right-hand man. One day, the Pharaoh came to him for the interpretation of a troubling dream: of seven fat cows being eaten by seven skinny cows. Joseph told him the seven fat cows meant the next 7 years would be years of plenty, and the 7

skinny cows meant that seven years of famine would follow. “You’d better be prepared”, Joseph told him. “You have a job!”, said the Pharaoh.

Joseph led the nation to store reserves of grain in the good years, so they could survive in the bad years, and not only survive but also help starving nations around them.

When the famine hit the region, Joseph’s 10 brothers—minus the youngest Benjamin—traveled to Egypt to buy grain. When they bowed before Joseph (remember the dream?) they did not recognize in the Prince of Egypt the brother whom they had sold into slavery.

Now to the last two scenes in Genesis. When Joseph broke down and told them that he was their brother, they were afraid for their lives, fearing Joseph would wreak revenge on them. But Joseph calmed them with these remarkable words: “Do not be distressed that you sold me here. It was to save life that God sent me here, to save the lives of many, and to save your lives. So do not waste yourself in grief.”

This was a view from eternal places. Joseph could see the workings of God in it all.

And now the last scene. Father Jacob had died and the brothers again cowered in fear before Joseph, afraid that with Father Jacob gone, Joseph would unleash his rage and take revenge on them.

When they cried out their fear, Joseph said to them: “Do not be afraid. For am I in the place of God?” As a boy he had acted like God, like he was above them, but now as one who had gone through much trial and suffering—sometimes we have to hit bottom to look up—he had grown wise and compassionate. Then he uttered these words which ring through history to us today:

You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.

Or in Everett Fox’s great translation:

You planned ill against me [but], God planned-it-over for good.

Our God is a planning-it-over kind of God, a God who works in the midst of the worst that can happen to bring about our good and the good of the world. Can you believe that God can take evil and turn it into good? That God can take the evil done to you and turn it into good? That God can take the evil *you* have done and turn it into good? Even into your own salvation?

That’s the view from the heavenly places, the view from the cross. God is planning it over all the time. That’s what redemption is all about.

II

Which brings us to Jesus' words from that cross, words which have changed the world, words which can change your life, my life. "Abba, Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." These words began a "Forgiveness Movement" which now reaches around the world.

Of course, we might say, "Well they *did* know what they were doing!" But not really, not fully. Nor do we know the harm we have done, or the extent of it. I'm always moved by the Iona Community's prayer of confession:

Before God, with the people of God,
we confess to our own brokenness:
to the ways we wound our lives,
the lives of others
and the life of the world.

And of course we know this only in part. And God forgives what we know and what we cannot now fully know.

Jesus' forgiveness movement began there on the cross and began to spread across the world. When one of the leaders of the early church, Stephen, was being stoned to death, he prayed, echoing Jesus: "Lord do not hold this sin against them."

III

The movement began to spread.

A number of years ago there was a Klan rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Some counter-protesters showed up and were beating a Klansman who was wearing a Confederate flag. An Associated Press photographer captured the scene.

In the photograph was a young eighteen-year-old black woman named Keshia Thomas. She had intervened and was shielding the racist, shielding him with her own body. And there he was, on the ground, skinheaded, tattooed, wearing a T-shirt with what looks like a racist slur. And there she was, child of God, raised in Jesus' forgiveness movement, placing her own body between his attackers and him.

Another story. As a young man, the Civil Leader and later Senator, John Lewis was almost beaten to death, his skull cracked open during the Civil Rights March across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. Governor George Wallace had sent troops to Selma to beat the marchers back. Years later, Wallace was left paralyzed by a would-be assassin's bullet. Now in a wheelchair, Wallace called Lewis to come visit. Lewis came. I'm not sure I would have.

He said to Lewis, "John, can you find it in your heart to forgive me?" Lewis replied, "Yes, Governor, I forgive you." Then Governor Wallace asked, "Do you

think God has it in his heart to forgive me?” John Lewis replied, “Governor Wallace, I am even more certain about that.” He’d been raised in the Book of Forgiveness.

The forgiveness movement goes on. Shall we join?

IV

Forgiveness is so difficult, so challenging and so crucial to our path of healing and well-being. That’s why the Bible can be called the Book of Forgiveness.

Forgiveness is a path, a path we choose. Acknowledging our need for forgiveness, our acceptance of forgiveness, our forgivingness toward others, and our forgiveness of ourselves are all part of that path, a longer path than we sometimes want, a more difficult path than we would want. But there are things that illumine that path—here are some:

First, there is the trust that God is at work to make of our hurts a healing, to make of the worst hurts of the world an avenue to healing and wholeness. God is improvising everyday on our behalf and world’s, planning-it-over, that what is darkest can be turned to light. For me, that word *predestination* means that God plans, then *plans it over*—for our good and the good of the world. It is happening all the time, even when we cannot see it.

Second is the acknowledgement that we too are in need of forgiveness, that we too have done things that harmed others, and that we, like those who crucified Jesus, have done harm that we do not know, or cannot acknowledge now. God has already forgiven you, completely.

Third, forgiveness is not an acceptance that what another has done to you is okay. It was a wrong! Nor is a restoration of relationship the goal of every act of forgiveness. To “forgive and forget”, as the expression goes, is not only impossible, it may set you up to be harmed again. *Forgiveness can help you walk away.*

Fourth, the Greek word for forgiveness means *to loose*, that is loose someone from their sins. We set them free from their sins and its crippling residue of guilt, shame, remorse and regret. It can set you and me free. Forgiveness is letting go of the pain of the past. The word “resentment” means literally to “feel again”, *re-feel*, to feel again and to keep on feeling the pain and hurt of the past. God wants you set free from the hurt that binds you.

The last step for today: forgiveness is a process. It is rarely completed in a moment, or a week or a year. Famous Christian C.S. Lewis wrote in his diary that he woke up and discovered that he had finally forgiven someone he thought he had forgiven decades before.

On Sunday evening of the first Easter, the disciples were huddled in fear behind locked doors when the risen Jesus appeared to them. “Peace”, he said to them, and a second time, “Peace”—because sometimes we need to hear it more than once. Then he said, “As the Abba has sent me, so send I you.” And then he blew onto them his own breath and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit”, because anyone who thinks they can be sent to do Christ’s holy work without the Holy Spirit, without Christ, is fooling themselves—and will soon find this out.

Then he gave his first command as he commissioned them, “Go, loose people from their sins!” The forgiveness movement had begun. And he invites us to join his *forgiveness movement* and his *forgiveness community*. We need the *community* to be part of the *movement*. It is in community that we learn forgiveness, to accept God’s forgiveness, to forgive others and to take our lives in our own arms as child and forgive ourselves.

When the opponents of Jesus saw him forgive someone of their sin, they called saw it blasphemy, because only *God*, they said, had the power to forgive sins. They were partly right, but what they missed was that God needs us to help people be forgiven. Regular people like us who’ve joined the forgiveness movement of Jesus. How about *now*!